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Roger Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Notes and index. 203 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0812239959; \$22.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0812220469.

Review by Peter Burke, Emmanuel College, Cambridge University.

As one of the leading members of the third—or is it the fourth?—generation of the *Annales* group, as well as one of the most distinguished cultural historians at work anywhere in the world today, Roger Chartier certainly needs no introduction to readers of this journal. Faced with this new book in a field that Chartier has been cultivating for decades, what readers most need to know is how *Inscription and Erasure* (the English version of *Inscrire et effacer*, 2005) is related to the author's earlier books on the same subject.

Like most of Chartier's best-known books, from *Cultural History* (1988) to *On the Edge of the Cliff* (1998), this new one is a collection of essays and lectures. Like so much of the author's work since the 1980s, it focuses on the history of the book, the history of reading, and the history of written culture—three topics or fields that overlap but do not quite coincide. As one might have expected, Chartier carries on his dialogue with historians such as Robert Darnton and Louis Marin; with cultural theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault; as well as with Don McKenzie, the genial New Zealander whose twin interests in drama and in the process of printing gave him an unusual standpoint from which to view the history of literature. Among Chartier's earlier publications, the book that most reminds me of *Inscription* is his *Forms and Meanings* (1995), four essays that respond to a single question, how form “constrains the production of meaning.”

However, where *Forms* combined two case-studies (one on princely patronage and the other on the reception of *Georges Dandin*) with two general essays, discussing (or dissolving) the idea of popular culture and considering the “great revolutions of written culture” from roll to codex, manuscript to print and print to screen), *Inscription* offers the reader seven case-studies. Two of them are concerned with *Don Quixote*—Spanish culture is a long-standing interest of Chartier's. Another one deals with England, analysing Ben Jonson's play *The Staple of News*, and draws on his work with Peter Stallybrass in Philadelphia, just as the Spanish chapters reveal his collaboration with Fernando Bouza and José Emilio Burucúa. Yet another essay focuses on Venice and a play by Carlo Goldoni. The remaining three case-studies (or four, if one includes the epilogue) are French, ranging from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, from Baudri de Bourgueil to Diderot, and it is on them that this review will focus.

The main theme of *Inscription* is the tension between “platonism” and “pragmatism,” in other words between “the immateriality of works and the materiality of texts.” Like the tension between form and meaning in *Form*, “the manifold relationship between inscription and erasure, between the durable record and the ephemeral text” gives the different essays a central theme. In discussing this theme Chartier returns to his old concern with appropriation—in his work on or against the idea of popular culture, for instance—and now “aims to show how certain literary works appropriated objects or practices that belonged to the written culture of their time.”

In the first essay in the book, for instance, the most important objects are green wax tablets. The poet

Baudri, a Benedictine abbot who became archbishop of Dol, wrote poems about his tablets, to his tablets, and on his tablets, which he used to compose his verses before he read them aloud. These ephemeral texts became durable when the finished versions were written on parchment by a scribe.

Another essay is concerned with Cyrano de Bergerac's *États et empires de la lune*. Chartier notes how the author "played with a number of common themes from the written culture of his time," imagining books that could read themselves, aloud, thus turning the traditional metaphor of the "voices of the pages" into literal reality. However, his main concern in this essay is with the text itself, with the long and difficult journey of *États et empires* from manuscript to print. Published posthumously in 1657, the book offered readers only a censored version of a fuller text, which had been circulating in manuscript and of which three diverse hand-written copies survive. Cyrano's text therefore allows Chartier to reflect on the practice of censorship, in this case for religious reasons, and also (like other scholars such as Fernando Bouza), on the advantages of circulation or "publication" in manuscript—including the lack of fixity, in other words the relative ease of revision.

The third essay on a French topic focuses on a relatively short piece by Denis Diderot, the *Eloge de Richardson* that appeared in the *Journal Etranger* in 1762, soon after the death of the English novelist. Diderot's obituary is essentially a description of the process of reading *Clarissa* and of "the effects caused by the reading of the novel," thus allowing Chartier to return to a favourite theme of his, that of the so-called "reading revolution" of the eighteenth century, and to examine it from a fresh angle. The supposed revolution was the shift from the "intensive" or slow reading of a few sacred or quasi-sacred texts to the "extensive," rapid, detached and critical reading of many texts. Chartier notes that the way in which Diderot claimed to have read *Clarissa* corresponds to the intensive mode, thus upsetting the chronology, and he also questions the value of any sharp opposition between the two modes. Instead he argues that what was new or revolutionary in the eighteenth century was the capacity to change gear, as we might say, and to read in a variety of ways. Even the reformulated thesis is vulnerable to criticism: Francis Bacon had already suggested that different kinds of book be read in different ways. In any case, Chartier offers no more examples in support of his argument. All the same, his point is plausible and deserves to be tested by later researchers.

The book's epilogue is also concerned with Diderot, but this time it focuses on the author's *Lettre historique et politique adressé à un magistrat sur le commerce de librairie*, concerned with freedom from censorship and with the property rights of authors. The subject of intellectual property allows Chartier to return to the central theme of his book via the paradox that "for texts to be subjected to the laws of property governing material objects, it was necessary to divorce them conceptually from any particular material embodiment."

In short, *Inscription* is a typical Chartier production, a collection of short pieces that combine a discussion of large general problems with the patient micro-analysis of specific texts in precise historical contexts. Like much of the author's work, this book not only analyses the relation between orality and writing but illustrates it as well, since it is based on lectures that have been elaborated into essays (they may not have required too much elaboration, since the author speaks, or at any rate lectures, like a book, unlike Cervantes, who wrote as he spoke). Almost miraculously, given his long preoccupation with certain themes, Chartier avoids the danger of giving readers "the mixture as before," by finding new cases to study as well as by shifting his emphasis from one major problem to another, changing his angle of vision to achieve new insights, or adding a few more bricks to what has become over the years an imposing intellectual structure. He continues to discuss texts with lucidity, precision, and penetration and to employ with great effectiveness ideas drawn from various sources: from the "graphic culture" of Armando Petrucci, to the cultural materialism of some British and American scholars, or to the point made by Jorge Luis Borges, which the author describes as the inspiration for these essays, that "A book is not an isolated entity: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships."

With this latest publication, the intellectual development of the author of *Inscription* is becoming increasingly visible. Comparing the new book with Chartier's earlier work, one might say that it is more—or at least more self-consciously—postmodern, at least in the broad sense of being preoccupied with the fluidity or instability of texts that were once believed to be fixed. *Inscription* also marks another stage in the author's trajectory, his gradual shift from social history through the history of literature to a more general history of the media, or more exactly, of media cultures. Will the author proceed further down this road?

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